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"An Enormous Amount of Human Waste": Self-esteem, Capitalism, and the US Prison, 1973-1989

Anaïs Lefèvre

1 In a widely quoted 1982 speech later reprinted in the *Public Administration Review*, Chief Justice Warren Burger expressed his wish to see a transformation of US prisons into "factories with fences," which would largely operate like normal companies. While he hoped that this industrialization of prisons would reduce the astronomical cost of "warehousing" prisoners[1] at a time of mass incarceration, he acknowledged that the production would likely not amount to much more than "a drop in the bucket in terms of gross national product." The real impact, he suggested, would be on prisoners' individual lives. Picturing prisoners as people who "lack self-esteem" and are "insecure" in large part because "they do not observe the concepts of work and accountability that made this country great," he presented the development of work programs behind bars as the obvious solution to these problems. "We do not need the help of behavioral scientists," he concluded, "to understand that human beings who are producing useful goods for the marketplace—who are being productive—have a better chance to develop the self-esteem essential to a normal, integrated personality" (Burger). While Warren Burger's vision was never fully implemented, it proved quite popular with prison administrators, who continue to refer to the "factories with fences" idea to this day (Factories with Fences). By connecting work, prisons, and self-esteem, Warren Burger advocated the introduction of a more rigorously capitalist organization of prison labor on the basis of prisoners' (supposed) psychological well-being. Far from being unique to Burger's vision, this tight association of prisoners' self-esteem with work was, as we will see, reflective of a much broader trend in the public conversation about prisons in the 1970s and 1980s.

2 The prison has long been intertwined with the maintenance of a regime of capital accumulation and privately-owned means of production which characterize capitalist societies. The legal system itself aims in great part at the protection of personal

property; as many have argued (Shelden; Reiman and Leighton), it also structurally disadvantages the poor. As French writer Anatole France famously noted, "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread" (qtd. in Fitoussi and Rosanvallon 94). Additionally, white-collar crimes, including those resulting in several deaths, are generally punished less harshly than the crimes for which poor people are typically arrested. This dynamic was intensified in the last third of the twentieth century, when the expansion and militarization of policing, the toughening of sentences for a variety of crimes, and the rise of an overall punitive public discourse gave way to a situation of mass incarceration in the United States which overwhelmingly targeted poor people of color (Hinton; Murakawa; Kohler-Hausmann).

3 This mutation coincided with a backlash on the welfare state and the rise of the contemporary stage of capitalism known as neoliberalism. Synthetically defined by Jamie Peck as an "open-ended and contradictory process of politically-assisted market rule" (Peck vii), neoliberalism mainly distinguishes itself from previous phases of capitalism in that it moves away from a doctrine of "laissez-faire"; instead, under neoliberalism, the state must actively pursue pro-market policies (W. Brown, 2015 63; Foucault, 2004 137). But neoliberalism has also become "a normative order of reason" beyond the specific policies which are generally associated with it (W. Brown, 2015 9), and centrally entails the conversion of an increasing number of political and social problems into market terms, which tend to redefine them as individual issues and to reduce possible answers to market-based solutions (W. Brown, 2006). Building on this idea of neoliberalism as a "normative order of reason," it becomes possible to study the gradual penetration of neoliberal discourse in public debates over time. While geographer David Harvey had identified Pinochet's coup in Chile on 11 September 1973, as the "first experiment with neoliberal state formation" (Harvey 7) and the 1973 global economic crisis as the defining moment of neoliberal hegemony, historians of the United States have more recently contested the idea of a brutal discontinuity between the liberal and neoliberal eras, highlighting how the influence of pro-business conservatives and small-government rhetoric was driving neoliberal market-based policies across much of the metropolitan United States by the 1950s (Diamond and Sugrue 4).

4 As Donna Murch has noted, the research on mass-incarceration and on neoliberalism have remained surprisingly separate (129); in the works that try to bridge this gap, the relationship between these two mutations has been analyzed in various ways. Bernard Harcourt has argued that in the neoliberal era, the de-legitimation of state action in the economic sphere went hand in hand with a re-legitimation of its punitive action in the penal sphere (Harcourt); for Loïc Wacquant, the expansion of the prison system is part of a broader strengthening of social control, intended to uphold the neoliberal order in spite of the stark inequalities it creates (Wacquant); according to Jordan T. Camp, the class anxieties created by the advent of neoliberalism were transmuted into consent to law and order politics which crucially rested on the rhetorical racialization of criminalization (Camp). These accounts shed much needed light on the role played by the prison in upholding the neoliberal regime, and analyses of the "prison-industrial complex" have shown the impressive private profits that have accompanied the rise of mass incarceration (M. Davis; Austin; Fulcher; Schlosser; Thompson). What remains to be studied in more depth, however, is the way in which the penal sphere, in addition to strengthening the advent of a neoliberal order, has itself been penetrated by neoliberal

logics; in other words, we need to understand how neoliberalization processes legitimized and influenced the expansion of the carceral state as they reshaped political culture and modes of governance in this era. Also connected to this is the need to supplement macro-analyses of the penal sphere with more specific studies of institutions and policies. The prison, for instance, is more than an abstract instrument of punishment; as it concretely operates, it is also, among other things, a workplace for both inmates and staff, and a space which prison administrators manage in part through "programs" whose philosophy is regularly defended and debated in the press and in front of congressional committees. By looking at the discourses deployed about prisons and prison work by prison administrators and other key actors like journalists and politicians, it becomes possible to have a clearer idea of the penetration of neoliberal logics behind bars.

5 The following discussion reflects on these issues using the minor yet revealing prism of the rise of "self-esteem" rhetoric for prison work issues between 1973 (a year marked by the landmark, punitive Rockefeller laws against drug abuse) and the end of the Reagan era in 1989. Using articles from major newspapers, transcripts of congressional hearings, political speeches, and publications by prison administrators and criminologists, this article shows how the "self-esteem" concept, when exploited by prison administrators, became a vector of capitalist ideology which proved particularly suited to a context of rising incarceration rates and the growing prominence of neoliberal logics. This meant, more specifically, that the way in which prison administrators understood the phrase "self-esteem," when they incorporated the concept into the philosophies of their prison programs, was shaped by neoliberal ideas of individual responsibility and moral expectations around work, along with a gendered vision of workers. Instead of focusing on prisoners' psychological well-being, the "self-esteem" concept was used in ways that strengthened dominant social norms.

6 This article also nuances the idea of a hegemonic attitude of punitiveness in the era of mass incarceration by studying one way in which this era also focused on the redefinition of the prisoners' selves. In the context of the pressure created by the prisoners' movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, the "self-esteem" concept was used by administrators to argue that the prison was not, after all, entirely "inhumane." While the punitive discourse increasingly resonated with the public, people paradoxically continued to expect prisons to rehabilitate so-called criminals (Sundt et al.). The "self-esteem" concept could be useful to respond to these sentiments and thus legitimize the prison system as it started to undergo a tremendous expansion. It was also, more generally, a way for the institution to present an image of competence and efficiency.

7 Finally, this article seeks to contribute to discussions of capitalism by showing the permeability of the prison world to outside capitalist discursive logics; as a cultural artifact, the history of the "self-esteem" concept allows us to think about the prison as a space where capitalism is both endangered and forcefully re-legitimized.

Adapting "Self-esteem" Rhetoric to the Prison Setting

8 The concept of self-esteem finds its origins in the psychological scholarship of the 1950s. William James, a founding figure of psychology in the United States, described it as the "ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities" and believed that, in the

words of sociologist Steven Ward, "a well-adjusted person was one who could successfully balance actuality with potentiality" (Ward 8). From the start, then, self-esteem was thought of neither as a state of confidence—which may be transient—nor as something innate and immutable, but as a lifetime goal towards which individuals could work. In the decades that followed, the concept gained traction among psychology researchers and, starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was increasingly popularized in the broader society, where its meaning gradually watered down to that of "unconditional acceptance of [oneself]" (Barksdale 111) or "self-satisfaction" (Sanford and Donovan 312). The press and other actors used it in connection to a variety of current debates and initiatives, including education, poverty, and the problems affecting women in society. A glance at Google's Ngram Viewer functionality indicates that the proportion of books which used the term rose dramatically between the 1950s and the 1990s, as it became a staple of (psychology-inspired) self-help literature. This large dissemination of a psychological concept in political discourse and popular culture was not unconnected to capitalist discourses and logics. In fact, as Eva Illouz explains in *Cold Intimacies*, there has been, since the first decades of the twentieth century, an entanglement of psychological discourse with capitalism which sought to redefine the self—a redefinition which, at least in part, fulfilled management purposes. According to Illouz, this capitalist use of psychological discourse flourished again in the 1960s and went to on to permeate the political and cultural spheres thereafter. It was in these years, for instance, that psychologist Abraham Maslow popularized the idea that "fear of success is that which prevents a person from aspiring to greatness and self-fulfillment," and pathologized those who did not reach this mighty goal, claiming that they had "built up all sorts of neurotic defenses against being human" (Illouz 45).

9 This discourse was certainly compatible with countercultural rejections of consumer society in the name of finding a more authentic self, but it could also agree with expanded consumption and revamped management techniques. This was especially true in a context of intense fear over an American "productivity lag," heightened by pollsters' arguments that the new generation of male workers was "in danger of repudiating their breadwinning role in exchange for a 1960s-style commitment to self-realization" (Zaretsky 110). Because this new generation of workers seemed to expect self-realization from work and because the lack of it was publicly associated with a diminution of productivity, it was in the interest of the business world to appropriate the concept of self-esteem. In *Integrating the Individual and the Organization* (1964), Harvard business professor Chris Agyris attempted to show the particular potentialities of self-esteem for management. He claimed that in order to extract "the most possible energy for productive efforts" from its employee, a successful managerial organization should design tasks so as to make them "consonant with those necessities for psychological success and self-esteem" (qtd. in Anthony 231). A clear continuation of this idea can be found in neoliberal injunctions to find one's "authentic self" through the performance of a job that we are meant to enjoy and devote our entire selves to (Catlaw and Marshall). Both here and in Maslow's theory, then, lack of success is attributed to a lack of self-esteem—an eminently individualizing notion, which had the advantage of blaming dysfunctions on the worker (if we choose to stick to Agyris's corporate context) without appearing to make moral accusations. Rather, workers were victims of themselves, of their own inability to live up to their true potential, and this state of affairs could be reversed if they transformed their mindset, thus fulfilling the goals set by their managers.

10 As an institution, the prison may be considered particularly likely to absorb the self-esteem concept for at least two reasons. Firstly, it has historically been very much concerned with the redefinition of the self. According to Michel Foucault, this was, in fact, precisely part of what was revolutionary about penitentiaries, when compared to previous forms of punishment (Foucault, 2008 245-246). The idea that individuals may "reach their potential" through self-transformation and genuine effort could only be amenable to an institution whose official purpose was not only the punishment, but also the rehabilitation of so-called criminals. Secondly, though prison labor is commonly seen as standing outside of the free market, prisons are workplaces and as such are permeable to the broader evolutions of management practices—including the attempt to incorporate the idea of self-esteem in work settings. This fact, as we will see in more detail, concerned not only the management of prisoners but also that of the guards. Beginning in the mid-1970s, the discourse of prison administrators, scholars, and journalists showed a growing tendency to psychologize prison-related work issues, resorting in particular to the "self-esteem" concept. For instance, in 1973 hearings in front of the Senate Subcommittee on National Penitentiaries, Carson Markley, the associate warden of the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, West Virginia, argued in favor of work furloughs for inmates in these terms:

> The use of furloughs has been seen to reinforce the self-esteem of the offender when he finds that he is trusted to take care of himself while still serving his sentence [...] and preserves his ability to make decisions concerning his own actions and conduct—an ability often atrophied through institutionalization. (Inmate Furloughs 4)

11 Criminologists had studied institutionalization in the 1950s, seeking to explain the cultural adjustment of prisoners to institutional life over a long period of time. Donald Clemmer talked about "prisonization" to describe the tendency of prisoners to adopt a new set of values and behaviors that would enable them to cope with their environment, because their former values were dissonant with the prison settings; for example, they may have placed a high value on autonomy on the outside and had virtually no autonomy left once in prison. This phenomenon, in turn, made it difficult for them to re-adapt to outside norms (Clemmer). What is interesting here is that prisonization is viewed as the antithesis of a sudden drop in self-esteem; on the contrary, it supposedly allows institutionalized people to maintain a sense of self-esteem through other means than what they used to rely on when they were free. Carson Markley's testimony, by contrast, implies that self-esteem cannot possibly be maintained within prison walls, and so it reevaluates self-esteem as an idea inextricably linked with conventional, outside work—from which prisoners, of course, are mostly excluded. Markley was not alone in making this implicit assessment. In a 1976 message to Congress, President Gerald Ford, talking about drug users, made the case that "[u]nless something is done to alter the fundamental conditions which led the individual to seek escape through drug use, a relapse is likely. A job, with the dignity and self-esteem it brings, is essential to help the individual re-enter the mainstream of American life" (Ford). Here, Ford valorized work not so much for its material consequences, but for its supposed psychological benefits—namely, the fact that it would result in higher self-esteem and thus thwart deviant impulses. Work was positioned as the natural, healthy antithesis to drug use; moreover, it was identified with re-entry, not with institutionalization.

12 That did not mean that work programs behind bars were spared from the new language of self-esteem; rather, the closer these programs were to outside work situations, the more likely they were to be associated with this rhetoric, both in the press and in official reports. In some cases, the work itself was assimilated to therapy. That was the case in a *Chicago Tribune* investigation of horticulture programs then being developed in several states, including Illinois and Maryland. Labelled "horticulture therapy," these programs seem to have consisted mainly in horticulture training; the "therapy" element was grounded almost exclusively in appeals to the inmates' growth in self-esteem: while the reporter also evoked the idea that "working with plants can help release tensions," administrators preferred to emphasize that, in the words of the Illinois Department of Correction's Division for Vocational Rehabilitation, "[t]he program gives skills, helps the kids find work. They seem to get a better view of themselves." Similarly, a director of a Youth Bureau in Maryland declared: "Their self-esteem was increased [...]. I think this therapy is ideal for those who characteristically lack skills, have low self-esteem and enjoy few opportunities for success" (Markoutsas). As this last comment also shows, "low self-esteem" increasingly became part of the keywords associated with social inequality (and, implicitly, racial inequalities), on both sides of the walls. In this sense, the evocation of work as a potential cure for low self-esteem is but another avatar of the long history of theories and policies reducing poverty-related problems to a question of employment and hard work. In other cases, the invocation of self-esteem was tied directly to material work conditions. For instance, a 1978 report from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) argued in favor of a transformation of prison labor so as to make it more similar to free work conditions: prisoners would work eight hours a day, be subjected to productivity requirements, and paid the minimum wage. Providing these "fair wages," in particular, would have the advantage of "developing their self-esteem and enhancing their sense of responsibility" (National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice 80-81).

13 This tendency to link prison-related work and self-esteem had a durable legacy. In the decades that followed, even as the general discourse on crime and prisons became significantly more punitive, in keeping with a broad toughening of sentences and living conditions, arguments in favor of prison labor never failed to mention that work behind bars would be good for prisoners' psychological well-being. It was one of the main arguments put forward by Chief Justice Warren Burger when he argued in favor of turning prisons into "factories with fences" in the early 1980s (Burger). Towards the end of the decade and into the 1990s, boot camps, in spite of the pointless, backbreaking nature of the work they made inmates perform, would also be defended on the same grounds (Cronin 22). Even more emblematic, perhaps, is the framing used by a *Los Angeles Times* journalist when reporting on the California practice of using prisoners on firefighting crews in 1986. In spite of the prisoners' mixed testimonies stressing harsh work conditions and physical exhaustion, the reporter had chosen a headline simply picturing the (highly problematic) program as a journey towards "a new sense of self-esteem" (Stewart). Thus, while the emphasis on promoting self-esteem through work may at first seem contradictory with the rise of punitive sentiments and measures concerning both crime and prisons, they are best understood as complementary. The concept of "self-esteem" did not cancel the punitive and exploitative aspect of prison labor, but contributed to justify it.

14 The question remains: why was prisoners' self-esteem so closely associated with work and not considered as an object in itself? Part of the answer certainly lies in the larger context of the debates concerning the purposes of the prison and the methods it could use to achieve them. The late 1960s and early 1970s had seen a mounting attack on what was deemed the "pretense of rehabilitation." Reformers, reporters, and activists on both sides of the walls denounced the tendency to use rehabilitation as a pretext to imprison people for indeterminate, often disproportionate amounts of time, especially if they were considered "troublemakers." This was notably the case of George Jackson, who spent twelve years in prison for a seventy-dollar robbery, in large part because he became an active and influential Black Panther figure in San Quentin, before he was killed by penitentiary authorities, allegedly in an escape attempt (Jackson; Berger, 2014a; 2014b 16). Various forms of psychiatric treatment also came under fire—not only in prisons, but also in the case of mental asylums, which underwent an impressive number of closures and diversions to community treatment alternatives during these years (Scull 64). Activists mounted a number of successful campaigns against experimental behavior modification programs (Thuma; Oelsner; McKelvey 378-379). Two of the most memorable movies of the time, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), illuminate this growing distrust of psychiatric authority, especially when used for coercive behavior modification; they suggested that there was a very fine line between medical "cure" of the mind and illegitimate social control of individuals. In *A Clockwork Orange*, the medical team is successful in making it impossible for Alex, the antihero, to commit violent acts; but the control they achieve through the association of pain to images of violence and sexuality projected on a screen clearly goes too far, as they also make it impossible for him to simply touch a woman or listen to Beethoven. This amputation of his self and its consequences seem so politically unacceptable that the doctors are ultimately forced to reverse the process and give Alex his personality back. The effect of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is perhaps even more chilling, because it does not give us this reversal, and ends in the merciful killing of the hero, a sane man passing as psychologically unstable to escape criminal conviction; his constant rebellions against medical authorities becomes pathologized to the point where his individuality is entirely suppressed through lobotomy. These movies were so iconic that they were used to comment on rehabilitation in real-world penal institutions (Stanford; Mitford 122; Morris 24; Oelsner; Halleck and Witte). The questioning of psychological treatment was not confined to the most coercive and brutal methods. Activists of various stripes contested its very principle because it implied that prisoners—not society or the justice system—needed to be "cured" (American Friends Service Committee 40; A.Y. Davis 52-53), and because no meaningful treatment could take place in the coercive, violent environment of the prison (Mitford 105-106). Furthermore, in 1974, an important criminologist concluded with much media attention that "nothing work[ed]" in the realm of prison rehabilitation programs (Martinson)—a conclusion he later rejected, to no avail as far as the media was concerned (M. Brown 174). Focusing exclusively on the recidivism rate of prisoners who participated in rehabilitation programs behind bars as a measure of success, Martinson concluded that even the "soft" psychological tools of individual and group counseling yielded insignificant results. Thus, the rhetoric of self-esteem emerged at a moment when, ironically, actual psychological knowledge had fallen out of favor as a tool of rehabilitation. It seems reasonable to conclude that part of the appeal of the "self-esteem" concept lay precisely in the fact that it had already been

popularized and used to describe a variety of social issues. Thus, it had lost its close initial identification with the psychological field and could be used to extoll the virtues of programs that were not strictly therapeutic. That way, officials and journalists could save the fundamentals of the rehabilitation narrative (whereby prisoners are decisively transformed by a particularly well-designed prison program and eventually become model citizens) from the sharp public contestations of treatment programs behind bars.

The Capitalist Implications of "Self-esteem" Rhetoric

15 What was, if any, the connection between this penetration of self-esteem rhetoric behind bars and capitalism? In a capitalist society, the prison represents a state of exception; the state, having incarcerated its citizens, can mistreat them in many ways but cannot—at least, not publicly and openly—let them starve; it is bound to provide minimal sustenance and shelter in ways which do not apply outside of the walls. In the free world, for instance, people can be evicted from their homes or cut off from welfare; in prison, while there is a steep gradation of punishment regimes, there is no equivalent for this total withdrawal of support. On the most basic level, whether prisoners hold a job or not is irrelevant to their ability to access food and a place to sleep—unlike what happens on the outside. In this situation, to connect prisoners' self-esteem to the work they perform (or will perform) can be construed as a way of ensuring that outside norms will prevail in the prison setting. Prison administrators play a key role in this process. Indeed, from the moment that self-esteem is connected to programs, it inevitably ceases to be an individual estimation of oneself and becomes shaped by prison administrators' own notion of what circumstances may produce self-esteem in others. Thus, sociologist Lynne Haney, observing contemporary California prisons, has noted that work programs offered to female inmates were described in terms of a "psychological journey to the promised land of self-esteem," while actually consisting in a "form of regulation and control" which insisted "on what kind of women they should become and what kind of lives they should lead" (Haney).

16 From the start, these assumptions about what should create self-esteem in prisoners were vitally shaped by key elements of the hegemonic "common sense" which, according to Gramsci, is essential to the maintenance of capitalism (Woolcock). One of these elements resides in the centrality of work in individuals' lives. As Max Weber has shown, the "Protestant work ethic" survived secularization, so that even without any reference to God, work is expected to be central to people's lives, a moral duty, including for those whose wealth is already so colossal that they do not actually need to work for a living (Weber 224). In the particular case of American capitalism, free work, by opposition to the work performed by enslaved people, was granted a cultural position that was all the more powerful as it was deeply connected to the notion of citizenship (Shklar). The views of prison administrators recurrently reflected these ideas. In the minds of some, the fact that many offenders were unemployed or employed at sub-poverty levels prior to their incarceration decisively "deprive[d] [them] of self-esteem," possibly explaining their resorting to crime, and leading to "an enormous amount of human tragedy and human waste," as an article published in the prison administrators' professional publication *Corrections Today* indicated (Coffey). The case was even clearer in the work and thought of Paul Keve, a reformist administrator

of the Delaware prison system in the 1970s who tried to develop work release and community corrections in order to "establish healthy work and social habits" which would hopefully prepare inmates for life outside the walls and reduce recidivism (Y. Williams 778). Writing that prison life led to "the loss of self-esteem and the related loss of motivation" (Keve 14), one of the solutions he suggested was to reconstitute the world of outside work down to the minutest details behind bars: prisoners would apply for work in prison and only obtain the job if they had the required qualifications. They would be paid full wages but required to pay for the "services and goods provided by the prison," including rent for the cell, admission to entertainment activities, fees for laundry and food at the cafeteria (Keve 135). A bank would be opened in the institution so that prisoners could maintain checking and saving accounts, and even obtain loans. Clearly, the idea found its inspiration in the halfway house system and transferred the principles of community correction behind bars. But what if a prisoner refused to work? Keve's answer was disarmingly simple:

> He would suffer only from the loss of wages and from the loss of such goods and services that the unearned money could have purchased. If his job absenteeism is excessive, he would additionally suffer the possibility of being fired. If his poor job management results in substantial economic failure, he could be evicted from his private cell and left to sleep on a cot in some open space (the equivalent of a park bench) without privacy. (Keve 136)

In short, he advocated that the prison system try to re-create the humanitarian scandal of homelessness behind bars—and all of this in the name of buttressing prisoners' self-esteem. The assumption is clearly that self-esteem is not only connected to work as such, but to the capitalist labor regime which rules citizens' lives in the free world.

17 Self-esteem rhetoric was also shaped by more diffuse elements of the capitalist ideological hegemony, like assumptions concerning gender. Marxist-feminist sociologist Martha Gimenez persuasively argues that the oppression of women in Western societies cannot be understood without reference to the capitalist labor regime in which it is inserted. She explains that "just as the relations between social classes are mediated by people's relationship to the means of production [...], the relationships between men and women under capitalism are mediated by their differential access to the conditions necessary for their physical and social reproduction, daily and generationally" (Gimenez 19). These differentiated conditions are built at least partly on the alienation and undermining of female bodies, "necessary fetters" which take both cultural and mercantile forms (Penny 2). On the side of production, the capitalist system rests on the performance of free labor in the home, which is still overwhelmingly left to women; on the side of consumption, it takes advantage of the fact that women have to "purchase the fundamentals of their own gender" (Penny 2). These elements, of course, are not just part of the economic condition of women but are also constitutive of social norms. As such, they played an important part in the way self-esteem was conceptualized, including (and perhaps especially) in the prison sphere, to the extent that prison administrators tended to view prisoners' self-esteem not so much as a ratio between their actualities and potentialities, as in James's original definition, but rather as a comparison between their present self and accepted social norms.

18 Thus, presentations of work programs for female prisoners did put forward the "self-esteem" argument, but gave it other manifestations than was the case when the programs were destined for men. For instance, a program set up in the mid-1970s at the

Rikers Island Correctional Institution for Women (New York) to train prisoners as secretaries and office workers emphasized not only technical, "marketable skills" but also more superficial elements apparently intended to increase their self-esteem, including "training in grooming, speech, job interviewing techniques." The journalist covering their first graduation ceremony even reported that "Representatives from *Glamour* magazine and [the cosmetics company] Revlon spent time with the women teaching them techniques in applying appropriate office make-up and in hairstyling" (Kennedy). Another program, entitled "Self-Esteem Through Femininity," sponsored by the Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation and conducted in twenty states at the time, included three courses, one of which was called "Charm and Job Preparation," and involved teaching prisoners about "makeup, poise, and posture," more than about actual work skills (Younger). Though some programs were later set up to offer "non-traditional" job-training opportunities for women, they remained marginal, temporary, and underfunded (Potter, 1979b; Herman; Freedman 154; Feinman 33-34).

19 The case of the female prisoner was at the intersection of expectations concerning prisoners' self-esteem and those concerning women's self-esteem, which were both considered typically low. Thus, on the one hand, work programs appeared as natural remedies, especially in a context in which welfare programs encouraging women's presence in the home were gradually replaced with incentives to make working-class women work at all cost (Piven and Cloward; Collins). On the other hand, there was the assumption that women prisoners also needed to be reconnected to the consensual role carved out for women in the outside (capitalist) society, and not only to their role as workers. This dynamic, of course, had a long history, but what was new about it in the 1970s was the reference to self-esteem, which made it seem as though these programs were what women deeply wanted and needed, instead of simply being presented as what was "proper" or "psychologically right" for women (Freedman 149). Then again, that it was indeed what they wanted remains dubious. Yet, whether or not they gained self-esteem through these programs, they had an interest in taking part in them so as to obtain an early release from the Board or earn a little money. Typically, women prisoners demanded the setting up of "non-traditional" training programs for financial reasons above all else (Potter, 1979a; Buck). Some recognized that "rehabilitation [...] is predicated on outward forms of conformity to society's feminine role as wife and mother" and even suggested that "one reason for 'deviant' behavior is caused by the narrow, unexciting and unfulfilling roles American women are expected to assume" ("Women Prisoner's Con & Ex"). Furthermore, they denounced a situation where the job market was "geared to men" and where to compete, "women not only [had] to be skilled but attractive" ("Women"). Here the anonymous authors turned prison administrators' self-esteem logic on its head. It was not through conformity to outside social norms that women prisoners would gain self-esteem; outside social norms were actually the problem.

The Exploitation of "Self-esteem" Rhetoric

20 What, in the end, did "self-esteem" rhetoric achieve? It may seem well-intentioned, even benevolent, when compared to the obviously cruel, punitive discourse which has often targeted prisoners since the late 1970s. After all, did it not at least try to bring prisoners' psychological well-being into the discussion? But we should also keep in

mind the context in which this rhetoric arose. Two aspects are of particular interest here: the economic context and the penal context. Economically, the United States in the 1970s began to face repetitive crises, stagflation, and the start of deindustrialization, as industries relocated their production to foreign countries where the cost of labor was cheaper. By the end of the decade, this trend had become a real concern, to the point where some commentators and political decision-makers started to look to prison labor as a way to keep industrial production on national soil (Prison Industries Improvement 29; Hawkins). Other industries simply moved from the cities to the suburbs. Unemployment hit people of color particularly hard and, in reaction, some communities organized to demand fair access to jobs; in Chicago, street gangs mounted a campaign for that purpose, but they were rapidly criminalized (Losier). For ex-prisoners looking for employment, the odds were even bleaker. There were many professions they were not allowed to perform and "the box" indicated to prospective employers that they had a criminal record, which is durably damaging for job prospects (Western and Beckett; Alexander 186). It was all very well to tie self-esteem to work when talking about prison programs, but if there were no or few jobs available on the outside for ex-prisoners, what was the point? Perhaps what mattered was not so much the suggestion that self-esteem could and should be found in work, but rather the idea that work (and success in general) depended on self-esteem—that is, at the end of the day, on the individual self rather than external, structural economic and social conditions. Seen in this light, it is no wonder that "self-esteem" rhetoric was used abundantly to refer to the most vulnerable populations in society. For instance, doctors and journalists used to it to explain the "widening health gap" between African Americans and whites, blaming the "low self-esteem among blacks who react adversely to the stresses of racism" (Lee). Likewise, women who found themselves in abusive or even violent relationships were also accused of having a fatally "low self-esteem" ("Low Self-Esteem"). Most importantly perhaps, the Reagan administration used the concept to attack welfare programs. In a 1988 message to Congress entitled "A Union of Individuals," Ronald Reagan made the following argument:

> The current welfare system has trapped too many Americans in a dependency on welfare that is hard to break and easy to pass on to succeeding generations. In recent years, a consensus has emerged that it is through work and the acceptance of responsibility that people develop the self-esteem to pull themselves up from dependency. (Reagan)

Here, self-esteem was cast in purely classist terms: Reagan assumed that the poor lacked self-esteem—indeed, that their poverty sprang in part from a lack of self-esteem—and suggested that wealth and self-esteem were naturally connected when he extolled the vision of "a virtual renaissance in America of liberty, productivity, prosperity, and self-esteem" (Reagan). His solution consisted in workfare programs which, in addition to making state aid less attractive, would allegedly allow welfare recipients to gain self-esteem (Weinraub). By 1990, a California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility was arguing that with self-esteem, "employees will then become more productive, teenagers will become less destructive, crime will decrease and welfare recipients will move towards financial self-sufficiency" (L. Williams). In all of these instances, self-esteem rhetoric was used to locate the cause of social issues in the individuals who suffered from them, eclipsing structural causes and the prospect of material remedies. This is entirely congruent with the neoliberal vision of individuals as morally obligated to act as "disciplined entrepreneurs, planning to meet their own needs, accepting personal responsibility for their problems, and

managing their daily affairs with prudence," instead of benefiting from state protection measures such as welfare (Soss et al.).

21 Self-esteem rhetoric proved particularly useful for prison administrators in the context of the 1970s, marked by the prisoners' movement. Building on the Nation of Islam's 1950s and 1960s struggles and on connections with New Left movements (Felber; Cummins), prisoners fought for their rights through legal challenges, strikes, and uprisings, engaging in a "strategy of visibility" (Berger, 2010); they understood that their actions would mean nothing if they were not accurately publicized and sought to "educate" the public to the realities of prisons which were operated in its name ("Goals"; "Public Indifference"). In the prison itself, they wanted to have a say in decision-making and shunned the toothless, consultative "councils" which were established in many prisons in these years to give prisoners the impression that they could voice their opinions; instead, they tried to create prison unions, operated by prisoners and for prisoners, though they also had members on the outside. Until 1978, when the Supreme Court backed prison administration attempts to derail prisoners' union activities in North Carolina, the legal vacuum meant that many such organizations were created and tried to obtain change in several states (Tibbs). Through these unions or otherwise, prisoners denounced inhumane living conditions, unfair treatment along racial and class lines, the exploitative nature of prison labor, the hypocritical promise of rehabilitation, the brutality of guards, the repression of political activism, as well as the unfair, unjust society which had caused their incarceration in the first place. They wanted to be recognized as human beings and workers, and many liberal media outlets were receptive to accusations of inhumane treatment behind bars, especially as scandals and high-profile events such as strikes and uprisings (often called "riots" by prison officials and the press) accumulated. Such circumstances led to evocations of radical transformations of the prison system, especially through greater reliance on community corrections. In this context, prison administrators' insistence that work programs would give prisoners self-esteem can be seen as part of a defense against these mounting criticisms. Such ideas were needed to make the case that prison was not intrinsically inhumane, but could be beneficial to prisoners. The gap between the demands of the prisoners' movement and the solutions offered by prison administrations was enormous: where prisoners demanded to be treated with dignity, they were offered programs geared towards increasing their self-esteem; and where they asked for structural change, they were met with offers of psychological change. In this sense, self-esteem rhetoric can be seen as a public relations strategy seeking to redefine criticisms of prisons on the administrators' own terms.

22 This way of redefining prison problems also worked when it came to guards. Guards, too, protested against their poor working conditions and organized into unions. They felt ignored by administrators as rising prison populations led to overcrowding and heightened tensions behind the walls, and they felt threatened by what they saw as the incessant victories of the prisoners' movement (Montilla; Hill; Page 24). Though they could feel at least partly vindicated by the start of the prison-building boom in the late 1970s and by the multiplication of "supermax" facilities, their unionization was a worrisome prospect for the penitentiary administration. Officials and scholars preferred to psychologize this dissent, picturing it in terms of self-esteem. For instance, in a Senate hearing about prisons in 1977 (Role of Prisons in Society 70-71), the

following exchange took place between Senator Joseph Biden and criminologist David Fogel, who tried to explain the continual reports of brutality behind bars:

> Mr. FOGEL: The field is generally in a demoralized state. And I think that's a function of its continued isolation. It suffers from a terrible mix that is dangerous in a democracy, and low visibility and high discretion. [...] I've done one of the few studies of guards, and I know very few lower-esteemed positions. It should not be that way, but I dare say that nobody could imagine that new parents, when looking at their baby, might have the aspiration of that child growing up to be a prison guard. That is a sorry state, because if I just extended that a bit to any other helping profession, it might not be so remote. [...] Guards are one problem. They have been given double, triple, quadruple message over the years—join treatment teams or lead group therapy or whatever—no one has taken the whip or a gun out of their hands. That's the inside part of corrections. The outside part of corrections is parole and probation.
>
> Senator BIDEN: Excuse me. Before you leave the guards. What is your view of their self-esteem?
>
> Mr. FOGEL: I think it's very low. These days they are radicalized to the right. This is really the result of terrible work conditions, inadequate responses by legislatures, and the hazards of work.

The exchange is interesting because David Fogel initially tries to focus the conversation on external circumstances—that is, on how guards *are esteemed* as a profession in society, rather than on their own self-esteem. But the notion of self-esteem had become such a usual way of explaining social and prison issues that Senator Biden returns to it as a potential explanation. Scholars were also fond of the concept. For instance, criminologist Norval Morris outlined the need to "redefine the role of line personnel in prison work if we are to upgrade their self-esteem and hence their morale" (Morris 108). By 1980, lack of self-esteem in prison guards was even used to explain the tragedy of the 1971 Attica uprising, which had been marked by the brutal retaliation of correctional officers and National guardsmen against prisoners who had taken control of D Yard for four days in the New York State institution (Stotland).

23 Conversely, as prison building accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, communities in rural areas increasingly saw prisons as "recession-proof" industries, which would offer jobs and self-esteem to people who had been directly impacted by deindustrialization. In cases like that of Corcoran, California, in the 1980s (Gilmore 148) or that of rural Kentucky nowadays (Story and Schept), prison jobs were reinvested by officials and local inhabitants as both economically profitable and socially useful opportunities. This phenomenon is also deeply linked to the neoliberal reinterpretation of work; in the words of the visual arts scholar and documentary filmmaker Brett Story, "while economic despair animates carceral growth in eastern Kentucky, ameliorations to its injuries are imagined primarily through the frameworks of individual responsibility and self-improvement, and employment is considered the primary vehicle for both" (Story 90). The ironic transformation of jobs typically associated with low self-esteem into much sought-after opportunities is a measure of how powerfully proponents of neoliberal policies and logics have managed to connect work, individual responsibility, and self-esteem; the connection also served to buttress the expansion of the carceral state.

Conclusion

24 The use of "self-esteem" rhetoric in relation to prison issues—and prison work issues in particular—is revealing in many ways. It points to the seldom-recognized discursive permeability between the penal and managerial spheres in these years, and shows how public officials can use discussions on the self and psychological well-being to the advantage of their institution, in ways that strengthen and legitimize capitalist logics. When administrators took it upon themselves to rebuild prisoners' allegedly low self-esteem, they actually tried to shape their behaviors in ways that were the most congruent with capitalist values. In the constant associations of self-esteem with work programs and the ways in which these programs were presented, the influence of neoliberal ideas about the self is easily recognizable: in spite of the difficult economic conditions of the 1970s, individuals were cast as the only ones responsible for both their crime and their rehabilitation, and the restoration of their self-esteem was presented as unattainable outside of regular, full-time employment. Furthermore, to focus the discussion on prisoner self-esteem was a convenient way to avoid confronting issues of structural inequalities and systemic injustice in the prison system as well as in society as a whole. If prisoners needed no more than better self-esteem to "fit in" with the rest of society, there was no need to acknowledge the possibility of enacting transformative, structural measures. Similarly, during the Reagan era, the "self-esteem" concept was used in ways that undermined structural analyses of poverty and reinforced the idea of individual responsibility—later to become the vaunted notion of "personal responsibility" of the New Democrats in the Clinton era.

25 This history also sheds light on the phenomenon of mass incarceration in the United States, by nuancing the now dominant thesis of a generalized rise in punitive discourse. While this is certainly true, there was also a softer, apparently benevolent side to the legitimation of the carceral state, which insisted that whatever was done to prisoners also benefited them in some way—a justification which allows us to understand the origins of the important current trend identified by Judah Schept, whereby new carceral facilities are promoted as an expression of "progressive politics" (98). In fact, perhaps because pure punitiveness seems morally unappealing, variations of this idea can be found in most punitive discourse concerning prisoners. In particular, when it came to prison labor, even the most outspokenly punitive measures like the 1994 Measure 17, which mandated 40-hour work weeks for Oregon prisoners, implied that work would also somehow benefit prisoners (Manzano). This argument, which is rarely backed up by testimonies of incarcerated people, may seem nothing more than a public relation device; but the form taken by official discourse surrounding prison and prison labor does matter. Ultimately, it is what shapes the acceptability of the institution and the way it operates in our societies.

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NOTES

1. In recent years, as research on the criminal justice system expanded, a discussion has developed around the terminology used to describe the experiences of people who are or have been incarcerated. Proponents of "person-first" language (see for instance Tran *et al.*) argue in favor of non-essentializing periphrases such as "people who experience incarceration." Though I use words like "prisoners" and "inmates" in this article for the sake of brevity, I use them precisely in the sense of this periphrasis: these words are taken to describe the temporary, administrative status of a person whose freedom has been taken away by the state, and are not intended to minimize their humanity, nor to reduce their identity to the fact of their incarceration. The words "prisoners" and "inmates" are not entirely interchangeable; "inmates" can be used in other contexts than prisons (hospitals for instance). Both "prisoners" and "inmates" were used by incarcerated people to describe themselves in publications like *The Outlaw* in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The word "convict," which they also used at times, tends to refer to people who received long sentences and is therefore too narrow for my purposes in this article.

ABSTRACTS

The period between the passage of the Rockefeller drug laws in 1973 and the Reagan-era expansion of the War on Drugs in the late 1980s was characterized by the rise of penal punitiveness and the triumph of neoliberal logics; it was also during these years that the concept of "self-esteem" came to be used recurrently in relation to prison work programs. Using articles from major newspapers, transcripts of congressional hearings, political speeches, and publications by prison administrators and criminologists, this article argues that the "self-esteem" concept was exploited by prison administrators to present rehabilitation and labor programs as legitimate and efficient. The concept became a vector of capitalist ideology in a context of rising incarceration rates and growing prominence of neoliberal logics. While the historiography of mass incarceration has explored the rise of punitiveness starting in the mid-1970s, this article suggests that there was also a seemingly benevolent side to the legitimation of the carceral state. It also seeks to add to the understanding of neoliberal transformation by exploring the penetration of neoliberal logics behind bars.

La période séparant l'adoption des lois antidrogues du gouverneur Rockefeller en 1973 de l'intensification de la « guerre contre la drogue » (*War on Drugs*) de la présidence Reagan dans la deuxième moitié des années 1980 fut caractérisée par des politiques pénales de plus en plus punitives et un triomphe des logiques néolibérales. Pendant cette période, le concept d' « estime de soi » était utilisé de manière récurrente à propos des programmes de travail en prison. S'appuyant sur des articles de presse, des transcriptions d'audiences au Congrès, des discours politiques et des écrits d'administrateurs pénitentiaires et de criminologues, cet article montre que le concept d' « estime de soi » fut exploité par les responsables d'institutions pénitentiaires pour présenter leurs programmes de réinsertion et de travail comme légitimes et efficaces. Ce concept devint un vecteur de l'idéologie capitaliste, tandis qu'explosait le nombre d'incarcérations, et de puissance accrue des logiques néolibérales. Alors que l'historiographie de l'incarcération de masse a exploré la montée de rhétoriques et de pratiques punitives à partir de la moitié des années 1970, cet article permet de penser un autre aspect de la légitimation du système carcéral en expansion : celle-ci a pu en effet prendre appui sur des arguments en apparence bienveillants, voire progressistes. Il permet également de mieux comprendre les transformations du néolibéralisme en explorant la manière dont les logiques néolibérales se sont immiscées derrière les barreaux.

INDEX

Keywords: prison, mass incarceration, self-esteem, prison labor, representation, neoliberalism, capitalism, rehabilitation, punitiveness, psychology, work, gender
Mots-clés: prison, incarcération de masse, estime de soi, travail pénitentiaire, représentation, néolibéralisme, capitalisme, réinsertion, politiques punitives, psychologie, travail, genre

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